

# One Minute Late by Jack Lait

DIXIE DAISY, the fifty young Georgia peach with the melodious down South accent, was heading back to the Big Bang after a short season at Saratoga, where the horses were running. Daisy loved the horses. In her country, before the flappers of modern times came and had ruined the romance out of life, fast steeds and fair ladies were the headline attractions of those celestial regions south of Mr. Mason's and Mr. Dixon's line. Daisy loved the combination. She contributed the looks and carried them wherever the public appeared. Not alone her love of thoroughbred equinity lured her to Saratoga. At that epochal moment she was crowded, and those crowds were prosperous, boisterous and numerous. Daisy's profession thrived best in just that surrounding. For her calling, as everyone knows, was the intricate and precarious art of extracting from the pockets of the populace that handsome living which the world owed her since Abraham Lincoln had rudely given her great-grandfather's slaves their freedom and thus driven her to this life.

She had picked a reasonable residue from the hiding places of the wads and the wallets during the season—not much, but the assured minimum for the time spent. Daisy collected the living the Northern world owed her by no means as a guess-work, but on an efficiency system like any other up-to-date business institution; she calculated so much for expense, so much more for overhead, wear and tear, leakage and breakage, depreciation, good will and taxes, to which she added a pro rata sinking fund and the profit dividend; all that totaled about \$100 a day, and that was the round figure fixed as the quota.

Saratoga hadn't run any ahead of this objective. The bookies had been hitting the sports rather consistently, and currency was comparatively scarce. Instead of a clean up, the racing season had been just bread and apple sauce, and Daisy felt aggrieved. She decided to give the up-State resort the Autumn air, and glide back to Manhattan, where the out-of-town buyers and the heavy influx of foreign fish might yield a handsomer per diem. The bookies hadn't been any too sweet to her, for she had ventured a few of her hard-earned dollars against the wrong entries, and she was peeved with the break all around.

Carter Lewlands put in a miserable breakfast with her at the hotel before she made for the train. Carter was shamelessly in love with Daisy. An upstanding young merchant of inherited banking ethics and Christian Vermont stock, he would naturally get dizzy over a dip from Dixie—poetic justice or ironic fate or the paradoxical perversity of nature looks after such as that.

Lewlands had met Daisy in the stands, had skidded hard on sight, had gone completely off the broad road of his characteristic balance when she had turned her appealing Big Bertha eyes on him and let loose that hummingbird Southern lingo, flavored with honey and seasoned with attic of American Bessemer.

Many a society had had whirled a wily lassoo for Carter Lewlands, and many a society mother had aimed a meat harpoon at him. But he had twisted and ducked and side-stepped until Daisy's eyes had thrown up his hands and Daisy's pouting lips had brought down his guard. When she was with him, the music of her pappy Georgia talk tinkled in his ear, and all night long he could hear her little dulcet intonations. He got to thinking in that musical pitch, and his thoughts were of love as much as her voice and wedding bells as silver as her notes.

Daisy took it all in, not exactly decided whether to work him or ignore him. She was known to him only as Dorothy Pollard, the name which she had registered at the hotel, and he took her for an Atlanta deb, adventurous and modern enough to go journeying without a chaperone to the one bright spot on the dismal map of girl where blood accompanied with the royal thrill of racing, and who would follow the ponies anywhere to serve her spirited fancies.

For more than a week he had devoted every available minute to looking into Daisy's eyes and listening to Daisy's lulling, lulling lingo.

Now, Daisy, though she had her faults and failings, had never leaned toward gold digging or that next-door neighbor "gold-finger" work, which, as everyone should know, is the specific art of nicking an amorous gent or lady for the valuables while said loving one is in the act of using both arms in hugging, or the like; and it is an ancient profession, just as well established as safe-blowing or the other nobler practices that have been charted, blue-printed and all but copyrighted in the progress through the ages of the devious methods whereby property may be transferred without recourse to the vulgarities of trade and traffic.

Though Daisy had always attracted men, she had used her charms only to oil herself out of corners. She depended on her skill and never on her allure to bring in the returns. Lewlands pointed courtship had not been irritating, neither had it been inspiring. It rather miffed her that she felt, somehow, a repugnance against giving him the "touch" on the numerous occasions when he was so utterly preoccupied that she could have sawed off his leg and he wouldn't have known she was operating. He had quite disarmed her, which was a dead loss, considering how much of her time he was consuming.

During the forenoon breakfast, in the course of which Lewlands earnestly pleaded with Daisy to marry him, to remain at Saratoga for a while longer, at least, and see if she couldn't learn to care for him, to give him her home address so that he could follow her—to yield him some sort of encouragement: something! Daisy toyed with her table tools and listened. She had put on the Southern Ritz at their first meeting so that she could maintain her standing at the hotel, and she had never altered off the character, so she couldn't lean across the board now and talk to Lewlands like a Dutch niece and explain to him that he was barking up a poison ivy vine. Everyone loves to pose for what he or she is not—for something better, higher, finer—and she unconsciously loved his bland acceptance of her as a rich, proper, well-bred, respectable girl.

So she languidly assured him, with many expressions of regret, that she did not love him, and, therefore, it would be futile for him to coax further hours that could mean only reiterated refusals. No, she was not in love with any other man (and that was true), and she had no defined objections against him. But every girl expects that great throbbing, palpitating emotion when she meets the man she loves, and Daisy could get no such reaction from Lewlands, as clever and clean and clear and devoted and upright as he unquestionably was. It was most lamentable, but there it was.

Lewlands offered her wealth and position—maybe not as aristocratic a position as her own, he ventured to say, for Southern folks are regarded as socially ultra—but still he held a place as the descendant of a sturdy old New England family; he offered her the first love that he, raised in New York and now past thirty, had ever held forth to any woman; he offered her all that he had and was. She shook her head.

"As for position, Calhoun," she told him, "the

Pollards don't partake of the wealth of the Lewlands, but they do have a sort of aristocracy that the Lewlands lack. I would love to write foot-stories about Mah grandfathers' foot with Gen' Lee and his daddy was a big cotton grower before Ah'm time'n waked out ev'ning in South Carolina. Since then we've sort o' gone to seed, financially; that is, we haven't what we'd like to have to maintain the manner of life that the Pollards maintain. I feel like a cad, putting myself in the position, almost, of extending bribes—and I know that what I have could scarcely amount to much as a fortune against the much greater ones that must have been laid at the feet of so beautiful a girl as you, Dorothy. But I love you, and I am clutching at every straw within my grasp to keep myself from sinking."

"But I offer you love—I only mention who I am and what I have and what I have a sort of aristocracy that the Lewlands lack. I would love to write foot-stories about Mah grandfathers' foot with Gen' Lee and his daddy was a big cotton grower before Ah'm time'n waked out ev'ning in South Carolina. Since then we've sort o' gone to seed, financially; that is, we haven't what we'd like to have to maintain the manner of life that the Pollards maintain. I feel like a cad, putting myself in the position, almost, of extending bribes—and I know that what I have could scarcely amount to much as a fortune against the much greater ones that must have been laid at the feet of so beautiful a girl as you, Dorothy. But I love you, and I am clutching at every straw within my grasp to keep myself from sinking."

"Wall, Ah'm afraid yo' sunk, Calhoun. Ah've often fancied what love might be like when it comes, and so Ah haven't fancied anything like it. Ah'm mighty fond of you, but it isn't that wild flutter that Ah'm waitin' for some man to bring me. We've been together, now, moly o' less, a couple of weeks, and a girl can tell in that time whether it's the grand passion or not. So—be's mah hand for a friend's good bah."

And she extended her little right one, the hand with the educated approach, the magic clutch and the trick getaway.

Lewlands looked at it a moment.

"No," he said, low and with a tremor of his chest, "give me the other one."

Daisy switched hands almost before she, herself, knew it.

Carter Lewlands took her slim, left hand in his brown, strong right. He held it hard and lovingly. His own left stole down into the pocket of his sport coat and he brought it up with a little purple velvet box, which he laid on the table. Without releasing her hand, he touched a little button and the lid of the velvet case jumped up. Carter took from the slit in the satin padding a ring.

"Dorothy," he said, huskily, "I want you to take this—from me."

She looked and saw a brilliant, fire-spitting ruby, surrounded with quarter-carat diamonds.

"Oh, Calhoun!" she gasped, and he felt a little back pull of her left hand, but he held it firmly.

"I bought it yesterday, Dorothy," he said. "I had hoped for a different answer to-day. I had hoped

to put this ring on the proper finger as an engagement token."

"But Ah never—"

"No. It was a gamble. I still would give anything you could name that I could command for the privilege of putting it there. But, if that is impossible, I want you to have it, anyway, as a souvenir—a remembrance from one man who loves you and always will. I am not going to put it on the 'engagement' finger. You may wear it on the little one, or on the other hand if you wish. But I ask you to accept it as a gift."

"Oh, Ah couldn't—it is a very valuable ring."

"It is yours. I will be handsomely repaid if I know that, now and then, as you glance at it, you may have a thought of me—a kindly one, I hope, though I am afraid any more tender or more vibrant one than friendship for a chap you met at the races or sympathy for a chump who is nursing a one-

sided love affair, is now out of the question. Take it, dear."

Dixie Daisy, pickpocket, looked across at the man—the sucker, she meant nothing in her life, never had, never could, in his hand was a ring worth thousands, that he offered her as her own, with no strings attached, no obligations, not even a moral responsibility or a conscientious scruple.

"Ah couldn't—accept it, Calhoun," she answered, and hung her head for a second.

"Too proud, eh? Can't take a gift from a Northern—"

Daisy was thinking.

Here was a windfall, made to order. She would have chanced a stretch in Sing Sing for half that ring, and would have spent a week waiting on eggshells over a mine of dynamite for a crack at it. And here it was being handed to her, gratis, in fee simple, for services to be rendered, to wit: giving



"Where's the ring?" Breathed Lewlands. She Only Scratched at Him Harder. "Tell me or I'll break your arm, you little crook!"

a kindly thought to the yep that was pushing it at her!

And, though her aristocratic lineage was all bolum and bunkum, and she was a crook and the daughter of two crooks, something within her rebelled at her accepting this handout.

She rose. He followed. He released her hand, and they walked into the hotel lobby together. Daisy was at his left, making it the simplest child's play for her to ease her right into his coat pocket and "strip" the little box, which means that she took out the ring and closed and left the container, somewhat after the manner of handling bill-books and wallets, so that if the goof gets worried he may slap his hand on his pocket, and, feeling the reassuring bulge, be satisfied for the time that he has not been "cleaned."

Daisy paid her bill, and, accompanied by a boy with her luggage and Carter Lewlands with a wan expression that tried to be resignation but only managed to achieve chagrin, she reached her taxi.

"Good bye, Dorothy," breathed Lewlands. "I guess that's all that's left to say."

"Good bah. Good luck," said Daisy.

Daisy's thoughts were clicking in workmanly manner. Lewlands, without doubt, would soon discover his loss. Yes, he would probably take right to his room and open the box with intent to gaze ruefully at the decimated ring, whereupon he would see that he had been trimmed, and in all probabilities would suspect who had done it, for he had put the ring back in the case himself at the table and had walked out with Daisy at his pocket side immediately afterward.

But—would he? Would he conjecture that the girl he adored could have done such a thing? Daisy puckered her forehead at this: she didn't want to hide behind his infatuation nor make capital of it, even to get a better start.

She had given him a fictitious name and a blind address. She would be swallowed up in New York and would probably never again meet him. If she should, of course, she would lie; she would never even give him one of the smiles that he was ready to die for; her denial would be curt, businesslike and cold turkey if she were ever faced with an accusation. Long before that could happen, she would have "pushed" the bauble and converted it of encouragement; something. Daisy toyed with flatfoots couldn't find it in nine years—she had learned that early, that jewelry and any other identifiable thing must be converted and must cover its tracks.

Her train was routed via Schenectady and Albany. She planted herself comfortably in the chair car and phoned with a heart easy and a spirit light.

The train pulled up at Schenectady on the dot. It left Schenectady half a minute late, arrived in Albany three-quarters of a minute late, and lost another fifteen seconds in the depot, with the result that when the porter of the chair car lifted his rubber-topped stepping-stool as the train jerked with the first start of its forward exit, he saw a man in knickerbockers frantically waving at him as he ran at top speed over tracks and past everything at him.

Dixie Daisy was looking out of the window on the other side of the car. She turned to reach for the magazine she had laid down, when her eyes beheld the last man she would have looked for there—then: Carter Lewlands, striding up the aisle.

He had already found her. He came to her chair, and she saw at once that it was to be a showdown.

Lewlands did not raise his hat, nor did he make any allowance for the courteous uses of such occasions. If he had ever read any dicta on "How to Greet a Lady When Meeting Her in a Parlor Car," the suggestions had been lost on him. He did not, however, "start a riot." He stopped at her chair, his chin set, bent down to where only she could hear what he was about to utter, and said:

"Give me my ring."

"Your ring?" inquired Daisy, in her farthest-South drawl and most syrupy scale. "Ah don't quite understand. Which'd you come from, anyway, Calhoun, so sudden?"

"I came by motor—directly to Albany. I knew your train was going by way of Schenectady. I found that I had been robbed two minutes after you left the hotel. I figured I could make it to Albany ahead of the train if I stepped on her a bit. My car was standing in front of the door, and, believe me, I made every other machine on the road look as though it were going backward. And here I am—made it by an eyelash."

"Wall—sit down. What's the big eye-dee?"

"No, I don't care to sit, and I don't want to prolong this conversation. I want to get out at the first stop and get back to where I left my car. You took my ring, Dorothy, and I want it back."

"Ah took yo' ring? Which ring, Calhoun?"

"Why, your—I mean—oh, don't joke. I know you took it and you know which one you took. Now, come through, or I'll go through. You don't want a scene, do you?"

"Scene? Ring? Calhoun, yo' absurd."

The train had crossed the river and ground down to a halt, not a station stop. Daisy changed her tactics, tilted her nose in the air, gave Lewlands a contemptuous look, picked up her patent leather case with one hand and her hand-bag with the other, and started down the car. Lewlands, without a second's hesitation, followed her. She reached the platform one step ahead of him. The door closed behind him. They were alone out there. The door was open, though the platform was down and it was a three-foot jump to the tracks. Daisy made for the opening. Lewlands seized her by the wrist and gave it a twist that threw the hand-bag to the floor. He put his foot on it as she made an effort to free her hand. She clawed at his face.

"Where's the ring?" breathed Lewlands. She only scratched at him harder. "Tell me, or I'll break your arm, you little crook. It cost me the sweetest memory of my life to do this. But I told you I come of New England stock. We may not be romantic lovers, but we're close traders."

"Le' go mah arm, you dirty Yankee," protested Daisy, as she squirmed.

"You wouldn't take it as a free gift, eh? But you'd steal it."

"Yes, Ah'd steal it befoh Ah'd be beholden to such as you foh it."

"—a pickpocket with ethics. Well, I'm a banker without any, maybe. You wouldn't take a gift from a man you don't love, and I wouldn't have one taken away from me by even a girl I do— I did—love. One of my ancestors helped throw the tea in Boston Harbor because the tax was an injustice, not because it was an expense. Where's the ring—talk up before I snap that elbow, and I'll do it, so help me."

"In—in the bag," fumed Daisy.

Lewlands threw her to one side and snatched the bag. Just then the train lurched forward. Lewlands steadied himself a second, then made a running leap, with the bag in his hand. Daisy stood unsteadily and saw him disappear. Then she made her way back into the car.

"He'll play the dance ketchin' this train paw," she speculated. "And if he winks ahead to N'York, Ah won't be aboard, because I'll Daisy's gettin' out at P'keepsie to back-track. Mah wrist aches, Ah've made mahself motulous to a lot of strangers, Ah've lost mah expensive p'ches, a newly new pawdew pad, 80 cents and a hand-embroidered hanky. Gee, that b'nd's a hahd loss! Ah'm mighty Ah got that ring in mah stocking, and the roll I copped off him befoh he grabbed mah arm, mean old brute."